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ABSTRACT

A project to raise the percentage of student attendance to 95 percent or above was initiated at Brownsville Junior High in Miami, Florida. The school is geographically located in a low socioeconomic area and the students are 80 percent black. The program included the use of community resources and incentives of frisbees, yo-yos, t-shirts, hamburger sandwiches, chicken dinners, and record albums for students. Their sponsors were awarded gasoline certificates, horseback riding lessons, and trophies. All the incentives and awards were provided by merchants in the school attendance area. No tax funds were used to promote the program. The project is considered successful because the schoolwide percentage of attendance is up 2-4 percentage points, pupils are making a greater effort to get to school on time, and pupils are expressing more self-pride. (Author/MLF)

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A PLAN FOR IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

AT

BROWNSVILLE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

1978

BY: DR. WALTER E. ODEN, PRINCIPAL

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ABOUT THE WRITER

Dr. Walter E. Oden is currently serving in his ninth year as principal of Brownsville Junior High School in Miami, Florida. He earned his Bachelor of Science Degree in Mathematics from Bethune-Cookman College in 1956, his Master of Education Degree in Guidance from Florida Atlantic University, also his Doctorate in Educational Administration from Florida Atlantic. Dr. Oden has taught math and science both at the junior and senior high level, he worked as an assistant football and basketball coach, has taught several courses in Administration and Supervision at Florida Atlantic University, has lectured at every major college or university in South Florida and has work outside of education as a radio announcer and D.J. He holds membership in numerous local, state and national organizations and has been the recipient of many honors and awards. Dr. Oden is married to the former Edith Bing and is the father of two sons, Walter II and Darin.

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BROWNSVILLE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

By: Dr. Walter E. Oden, Principal

ABSTRACT

A project to raise the percentage of student attendance was initiated at Brownsville Junior High in Miami, Florida. During the 1976-77 school year the school's over all percentage of attendance was 86.84. The goal of the school is to raise this annual percentage level to 95% or above.

Brownsville Junior High is a school that is 80% black and geographically located in what is termed as a low socio-economic area, even though some of the pupils who live in the are are bussed-in from some of the more affluent families.

In order to achieve our goal of raising the percentage of attendance to 95% or above, a program that included the use of community resources and incentives was organized. The human resources included such agencies as: The District Consultant for Guidance and Psychological Services, the Court and Community Liaison Specialist, the School Social Worker, the School Visiting Teacher, the Dade County Department of Youth Services (representative), the Area Staff Director from Dade County Schools- North Central Area, and the District Coordinator of Attendance Services for Dade County Schools. The incentive included such items as frisbees, yo-yos, t-shirts, hamburger

sandwiches, chicken dinners and record albums for students, and for their sponsors gasoline certificates, horseback riding lessons and trophies have been provided. All of the incentives and awards were provided or donated by merchants in the school attendance area. No tax funds have been used to promote the program.

So far the program is proving to be successful as evidenced by the fact that: The school-wide percentage of attendance is up 2-4 percentage points, pupils are making a greater effort to get to school on time each morning, Community Agencies are now involved in the school attendance program, the pupils are expressing more self-pride and their morale is at an all time high. Further, the Community appears to be taking a more positive attitude toward the school as a whole.

Most people agree that basic skills are important for pupils to master. Many of the pupils with poor attendance records are lacking in these skills. If these pupils are to be taught, they must first come to school.

A PLAN FOR IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

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BROWNSVILLE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

By: Dr. Walter E. Oden

INTRODUCTION

The Faculty and Staff at Brownsville Junior High School, at the request of our School Administrative Team and the District Division of Student Services, have agreed to work cooperatively to find motivational techniques to raise the level of attendance at our school.

Presently, across the country everyone seems to be stressing the importance of the basic skills of reading and mathematics. Many of the pupils who are not in regular attendance at school are lacking in these basic skills. Our school staff believes that in order for us to teach the pupils they must be in school.

During the 1976-77 school year our annual school-wide percentage of attendance was 86.84. If we are to help children to reach their minimum educational and social development, educators and lay persons alike must find ways of insuring their daily attendance in school.

The faculty and staff at our school decided that in order for us to improve pupil attendance, it was necessary to form a committee for attendance for the purpose of devising a plan, aimed at promoting maximum pupil daily attendance. The committee was comprised of the Attendance Clerk, our Internal Suspension Coordinator, our two Assistant Principals, a parent from our Booster's Club and the school principal. Of course, outside agencies provided additional input.

The committee for attendance decided to use incentives and human resources to motivate pupils to come to school. It was further decided that the incentive portion of the project should be divided into "contest periods." That these contest periods should be of a short period of time. This is due to the inability of many of the pupils in the school to work for anything with long range implications. Many of these pupils must see immediate rewards. This is an attribute of any number of pupils from a lower-socio economic background. Further, most pupils have little or no tolerance for working for long range goals regardless of their background. Therefore, the first contest period was only one week in duration. The second contest period was for two weeks and the third for three weeks. The contest periods now last for one month and will continue being one month for the remainder of the school year.

Rationale: Most schools and school districts across this country have experienced some problems in getting pupils to attend school. Brownsville Junior High School is no different in that respect. Many of our students are tardy to school as well as absent in many cases. On any given day at our school it is possible to observe as many as seventy-five (75) to one hundred twenty-five (125) pupils showing up tardy for their first hour class. Further, on any given day it is possible to find that our percentage of attendance school-wide, will range somewhere between eighty (80) percent and ninety-two (92) percent. Our school is located in a lower socio-economic area in Miami, Florida in what is termed as inner-city. In view of this geographic location and the problems generally associated with kids from this type of background, a percentage of 80.92 in some circles may be considered good, if not remarkable. This to us, of course, at Brownsville Junior High School, is considered less than desirable.

Purpose: The committee for attendance at this school felt it was necessary to find unique ways of motivating students, who were habitually absent, to attend school on a regular basis. It must be understood that the primary purpose of the school is to educate children. In order to accomplish this purpose it is necessary to have pupils attend school on a daily basis. Getting pupils to attend school on a daily basis

must become the single most important concern of all school personnel. This carries an educational value as well as a monetary value for the school and the district. Remember that instructional, non-instructional and all support programs would cease to exist if there were no children in school.

Goal: The primary goal of this project is to raise the school-wide percentage of attendance from its present level of ninety-one (91) percent to ninety-five (95) percent or above. To maintain this average throughout the school year would insure an annual percentage of attendance above the 86.84 attained during the 1976-77 school year. Further, this committee aims to reduce the number of pupils coming to school tardy each day from seventy-five (75) to one hundred twenty-five (125) to a more manageable number. Our goal is to reduce this number to less than twenty-five (25) students.

Procedures: In order to reach the desired percentage of attendance (95% or above), the following steps as agreed upon by the school committee for attendance were taken:

I. An incentive and reward program has been initiated

   A. Tangible incentives

   B. In-tangible incentives

II. More phone calls being made to homes to inform parents of pupil's absence.

III. Parents informed daily, by post card, when pupil is absent.

IV. Community agents and school support personnel are assisting in motivating pupils to stay in school who are habitually absent. Included are:

A. The District Consultant for Guidance and Psychological Services

B. The Court and Community Liaison Specialist

C. The School Social Worker

D. The School Visiting Teacher

E. The Dade County Department of Youth Services Representative

F. Our Area Staff Director from Dade County Schools-North Central Area

G. The District Coordinator of Attendance Services for Dade County Schools

The Incentive and Reward Program

This part of the program is the heart of the project and probably was the most controversial, initially. Opinions were varied by professionals and laymen alike. Some professionals thought it was a good idea and others thought it was going a bit too far to get pupils to accept a free education. They

remembered when they were in school and no one did as much for them. Of course it must be noted that in some communities a project of this nature may not be necessary; while in other communities it may be extremely important. There were many laymen who expressed positive feelings to the school administrators and there were some who felt it was a misuse of taxpayers money. However, such a position fails to take into account that the inescapable alternative is immensely more expensive. In many cases these concerns were made by laymen who were not knowledgeable about the project; inasmuch as no tax funds were expended on the project whatsoever. Therefore, community information and orientation is a continuous and vital part of this project.

Through this portion of the project both tangible and intangible incentives and rewards are provided for each pupil in the class and the teacher whose homeroom has the highest percentage of attendance, ninety-five (95) percent or above during the pre-arranged period of time (known as the contest period.) The contest period may last anywhere from one week to six weeks, based on the decision of the school committee on attendance.

Tangible Incentives: Merchants have donated such tangible incentives as frisbees, yo-yo's, t-shirts, hamburger sandwiches, chicken dinners and record albums for students, and gasoline certificates, horseback riding lessons and trophies for teachers. These incentives were selected because they were items that merchants were willing to donate and that pupils in this age

group could appreciate. Presently, these items constitute the main sources of the tangible incentive program. All of these incentives or rewards have been donated by merchants who operate businesses within the schools' attendance zone where it is felt by school officials that the most immediate community involvement is needed. No attempts have been made by school officials or anyone connected with the project to solicit items from sources outside the immediate community. Nor, have any taxpayers funds been used for these incentives or awards in any form.

During the first contest period, which was one week in duration September 8th - 14th, 1977, only a five dollar gasoline certificate from Exxon was presented to the homeroom teacher with the highest percentage of attendance (95% or above). No pupil received an incentive. This was call the trial run and was only to ascertain if teachers would generate the kind of interest necessary to motivate pupils to improve their attendance, if they were rewarded for their efforts. Sure, teachers have always made attempts to motivate pupils to come to school, most of these attempts have been successful, while some have not. Some teachers feel that their primary function is to teach only those pupils who come to school, and rightly so. This project attempts to get teachers to place attendance high on their list of priorities. Just as on any job if in-

centives are provided by its employers, the employees will usually do just a little bit more than that which is considered normal. The winner of this first contest period was a Special Education class. The pupils and their teacher were especially proud of this accomplishment and the school administrative team shared in its excitement.

The second contest period lasted for two weeks October 17th - 28th, 1977 and was won by homeroom class 8-2. The percentage of attendance for this class was ninety-six (96). All of the pupils and the teacher received an incentive. The students received either a t-shirt, frisbee, hamburger or chicken dinner; the teacher received a $10.00 gasoline certificate. The students and the teacher were also given a banquet in the school's cafeteria. The banquest amounted to a special seating arrangement in the cafeteria and the students were the center of attention. Attending the banquet were the Director of Student Services, an Area Director, a School Board Member, the Superintendent of Schools, several radio station announcers and two T.V. network representatives along with photographers from our local T.V. stations. In addition to the individual awards received by the pupils and their teacher, the group received a huge trophy that was donated by one of the merchants in the community who wanted "to do

something good for the kids." The trophy was engraved with the teacher's name and the homeroom section. It is to be housed in the homeroom class declared the winner at the end of each contest period.

Intangible Incentives:

The intangible incentives will be those things that pupils enjoy doing. Further, they are also things that maybe done for large groups of pupils. Such as, dances at our school, picnics in park adjacent to the school, field trips to movies, field trips to the Miami Dolphins and University of Miami football games, and a host of similar activities. These are the kinds of things that cost us absolutely nothing in terms of money. Nor is it necessary to be concerned about running out of them as long as one is quite imaginative. We also recognize that pupils enjoy having their pictures taken and reading about themselves in the community newspaper as well as the larger newspapers. Therefore, as part of the intangible incentive program news releases are sent to the small community newspaper along with pictures of some or all of the pupils. Ones imagination could conceivably run on and on with things that could be done to provide intangible incentives for individual or groups of pupils in our school. The third contest period lasted for three weeks, October 4th - November 18th, 1977. An eighth grade class sponsored by

Mr. Gary Taylor, won with a 98.22 percentage of attendance. This class did not receive the same attention from the media. However, the faculty, staff and school administrators presented the class with similar incentives and rewards as had been presented to the previous class.

MORE PHONE CALLS BEING MADE TO THE HOMES TO INFORM PARENTS OF PUPILS ABSENCE

It is believed that most schools make some attempts to call or write the homes of pupils who are absent from school to inform the parents of their children's non-attendance. Like everyone else, we have made our portion of calls to parents and we have sent numerous post cards home.

As part of this program it is imperative to call the home of each pupil, everyday, who is absent from school to inform the parents. Due to the shortage of adult help, student office workers were trained to call the homes of pupils who are absent. Part of their training was to know when to give the phone to an adult in the office. Usually this is done when a parent becomes irate or begins to use profanity while talking to the student office worker. However, much of what the parent says and his apparent attitude concerning the phone call is recorded on the pupils attendance card for future reference.

POST CARDS SENT HOME

In addition to the phone calls, the parents of each pupil who was absent during the week receives a post card indicating the day(s) during the week that the pupil was absent. This procedure is also necessary to the success of the program. It tends to bombard the parents with a knowledge of the fact that the pupil was absent during the week. By this time the parents would have received a phone call for each day the pupil was absent from school and finally a post card comes to the home at the end

of the week. Some parents are appreciative of the fact that the school tries to communicate with the home and others become irate and send nasty replies, but in any case the technique seems to work.

COMMUNITY AGENCIES AND SCHOOL SUPPORT PERSONNEL INVOLVEMENT

Our school administrators and the committee on attendance believe that community agencies and school support personnel have valuable roles to play in assisting schools with their attendance problems. People working in these areas are rarely called upon by school officials to assist with problems of attendance. Yet, these agencies have expertise in dealing with these problems from which the schools can benefit. Therefore, for this project the school administrators worked cooperatively with the District's Division of Student Services to set-up a task force. The task force consisted of the district consultant for guidance and psychological services, an area director, the district coordinator of attendance services, the court and community liaison specialist, the school social worker, the school visiting teacher and a representative from the Dade County Department of Youth Services. Immediately, these agencies began looking at how their services could be used, and what their roles would be in assisting the school with its attendance problems. A meeting was set up between these agencies and the school administrators to discuss the problem as well as to outline and begin implementing strategies and specific services to be provided by each agency in an attempt to improve attendance at our school.

To these agencies, it became an item of priority to provide whatever services or assistance needed to the pupils of this school in a very timely and most expedient manner. Such services or assistance may include, but are not limited to:

A. Identifying pupils for special services and placement.

B. Immediate processing of pupils for psychological services and homebound instruction.

C. Immediate processing of pupils whose conditions render it inadvisable for their attendance in school (exemption).

D. Immediate processing and scheduling of intake conferences by the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services for those pupils who warrant judicial attention.

E. Special attention to parents from the Division of Student Services, the School Social Worker and the Visiting Teacher.

Findings: The administrators at this school along with many of the teachers have observed a positive attitude on the part of the pupils regarding the attendance project. The records now indicate that only a few pupils are arriving on our campus late. This is remarkable within itself, in-view of the fact that many of the experts can give justifiable reasons for these pupils to be tardy in attendance.

The records will also indicate that the school-wide percentage of attendance is up by 2-4 percentage points over the same period of time a year ago. While the school has not reached its school-wide attendance goal of ninety-five (95) percent or above, there is at least one positive sign and that is the interest

that the pupils are taking in the project itself. Most of the pupils can tell you what the project is all about and why it is necessary. It has also been observed that the pupils in the various classes are exerting tremendous peer pressure on each other. In other words, they phone their classmates who are absent and verbally encourage each other to come to school so that their homeroom can have the highest percentage of attendance at the end of the contest period. Further, there exists a lot of competition among the individual classes at the school.

It has been determined that our students morale is up at an all time high and individually the students are beginning to express more pride in their school and themselves. The school administrators have recorded fewer fights between the students and an improvement in the overall behavior of the students. This in part, may be due to the amount of coverage from the media aside from the efforts made by the faculty and staff to being about behavioral changes. Our school received national attention from NBC-T.V., CBS-T.V., and ABC-T.V. The principal gave a fifteen minute interview to Chuck Bridges at a radio station in Toronto, Canada. He was further interviewed by radio stations in Boston, Mass.; Buffalo, New York; New York City and Los Angeles, California. Our school also received attention locally for Channels 2, 4, 6, 7, and 10, and from radio stations WIOD, WFUN, and WMBM. Other radio stations covered the project, however, their call letters were not made known to the writers. The West German press also called for information concerning the project. With this kind of activity it is

bound to have either a positive or negative affect on the teachers and the pupils in the school. In this case the affect has been most positive.

The project has had a positive affect on the part of the community. In view of the amount of negative publicity the school has experienced in the past, it is very difficult for any positive programs to make an impression on the community. However, this program has done a lot to change the image of the school. The writer has been told that several colleges of education around the country have been discussing the pros and cons of the incentives portion of the project. Further, that the project was discussed by individuals attending national meetings such as the National Urban League and the National Alliance of Black School Educators, meeting in Chicago.

As a means of giving support to the project, Pi Nu Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity in South Miami has offered its services in the form of a behavioral modification program. Through this program several students based upon their behavior and attendance in school will be treated to a weekend outing with students from other areas of the county. These students will be either spectators or participants in sporting events.

Conclusions: A project of this type would naturally attract an unusual amount of attention from all parts of the country since attendance problems are not unique to Brownsville Junior High School. At one time or the other, all public schools have experienced problems in getting some pupils to attend school on a regular basis.

The public in now demanding nothing short of quality education on the part of all schools. Those of us associated with providing educational experiences for pupils know that in order for the school to be in command of the experiences pupils have in school, it is necessary for the pupils to be in attendance. All across the nation much concern is being expressed, on the part of taxpayers, relative to basic skills. Many of the pupils who are not in school are the ones lacking in basic skills, therefore, it is imperative that we find ways to motivate these pupils to come to school. This project has prompted many schools in the Dade County School District to try similar activities. Further, there is evidence that schools around the country are initiating innovative attendance projects. While some laymen expressed the fact that no tax funds be used for the project this writer feels the exact opposite, if the expenditure is necessary and can be used to provide incentives to insure better school attendance.